In 1972, a group of Bowdoin students who volunteered in the Brunswick community sought to make service opportunities available to other students. With Professor of Education Paul Hazleton and Department Coordinator Ann Pierson, they created the Voluntary Services Program (VSP) Committee. Comprised of student leaders and advised by Pierson, VSP increased the visibility of community service opportunities. As a result, the number of students participating in service activities increased dramatically. After Pierson retired, Elsa Martz, physics department coordinator, became the students’ adviser, and remained so through 1995 when administrative changes led to the dissolution of VSP.

Several years later, Bowdoin’s first Americorps*VISTA member Lydia Bell (Class of 2000) gathered student leaders of service organizations from across campus and brought student volunteerism together with oversight of Common Good Day and the America Reads tutoring program. In 2001, the College allocated space in Coles Tower as a central meeting place for students and community members; Bell and student leaders decided to call it the Community Service Resource Center (CSRC). Bell accompanied students to Peru for the first Alternative Spring Break (ASB) trip and piloted the Common Good Grant Committee.

Concurrently, faculty members became interested in the pedagogy of service learning as a way to connect course learning objectives to community needs. A committee of faculty and staff from Geology, Sociology, and Environmental Studies worked to establish an annual symposium to highlight service learning course projects and to provide support for other interested faculty.

In 2003, with Susie Dorn’s appointment as director of the CSRC, multiple one-year VISTA volunteers (all Bowdoin graduates) helped build capacity within the CSRC to accommodate a significant increase in student volunteers and the growing number of faculty interested in service learning, while simultaneously introducing a leadership development program. During this time, ASB trips rose from one to six annually, student involvement in the community tripled, and the number of service learning courses increased from five to nearly twenty a year.

By establishing the Joseph McKeen Center for the Common Good, Bowdoin College has once again recognized the importance of both student leadership and faculty initiative in its commitment to advancing the common good, as first articulated by Joseph McKeen in 1802.